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ABSTRACT

A Reading Interest Group of representatives from predominantly black colleges of the country was established by the Southern Regional Education Board's Institute of Higher Educational Opportunity. Representing 15 institutions from the East and Midwest, this group met and attested to the fact that a major percentage of the failures of black students could be traced to a lack of reading comprehension skills. Specific needs and concerns registered by this group are outlined in the report. The major needs are: (1) production of materials pertinent to black students, (2) examination and evaluation of current reading materials used, and (3) research designs relative to all aspects of reading programs which are currently in effect at predominantly black colleges. The following issues were expanded and discussed in this report: (1) improvement of programs, (2) development of a useful bibliography with the contribution of black reading specialists, (3) production of materials incorporating the work of black reading teachers, (4) administrative support, (5) staffing problems, and (6) teacher education. (References are included.) (AW)

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SYMPOSIUM IX

CRITICAL ISSUES IN READING INSTRUCTION AMONG BLACK TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

"Current Issues - The Public College"

It seems that the current critical issues in reading instruction among black teachers and students at the college level are the same as those of a decade ago. They exist now as then with needs and treatment in polarity. The situation now is even more critical and alarming, especially in light of the numerous efforts launched over the past ten years in an attempt to remedy the disparaging influences which deter the reading achievement of black college students.

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There are two points of view, one appearing in print in 1963, the other is in current print, which are pertinent to the issues which I shall enumerate in this talk.

The first is that of Louis Lomax who "speaks out" in a September edition of the Saturday Evening Post.[1] Lomax states that "the most disturbing failure of the Negro colleges is the alarming number of graduates who cannot think clearly, speak properly or work effectively in the fields they are alleged to have mastered. He pinpoints the problem as being the effects of inadequate training of faculty and students on black campuses.

This of course is not an indictment against those black professors who are indeed learned, qualified and aware. But it does depict the air of "laxity and indifference" of some who according to Lomax exist on college campuses and serve to negate our reasons for being there.

These problems do not exist solely on black college campuses. Arthur Pearl[2] in a current article states the causes of the failure of Upward Bound Programs. These programs fail at integrated colleges also because they "recapitulate" evils that have befallen the disadvantaged throughout their school career.

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[1] Louis Lomax, "Young Negroes Aren't Ready," the Saturday Evening Post, September 21, 1963. pp. 12-14.

[2] Arthur Pearl, "The Failure of Upward Bound," the Chronicle of Higher Education, March 27, 1972, p. 8.

The emphasis of the program is upon remedy for the years of failure in school prior to college. Pearl points out that many staff members of integrated colleges cannot cope with learning problems the black students bring to college. He states, "Upward Bound programs suffer because staff members can only do their 'thing,' and their thing is not only inappropriate but is also saturated with class, race, and ethnic bias."[3]

Black students are still struggling for survival at integrated colleges. The environments in which they find themselves in too many instances are not those which foster situations to allow them to grow personally or academically. Energy which could be used in academic pursuits is sapped up in an attempt to be heard and to have curricula draw upon their cultural strengths and pertain to them as individuals.

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[3] Ibid.

Current Issues

In view of the above areas of concern in making the predominantly black colleges more effective in its educative activities, the Southern Regional Education Board's Institute of Higher Educational Opportunity established a Reading Interest Group of representatives from predominantly black colleges of our nation.

This group representing fifteen institutions from the East and Midwest met and attested to the fact that a major percentage of the failures of black students could be traced to the lack of reading-comprehension skills.

The following specific needs and concerns were registered by the group:[4]

1. The need to improve and strengthen the reading program for freshman students at black colleges.
2. The need for extensive bibliography of reading materials specifically directed to the needs of black students.
3. The need to produce materials which are pertinent to black students.
4. Increased support from state agencies and professional organizations to give legitimate and/or credited status to the public schools.

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[4]Isabella T. Jenkins, recorder, unpublished minutes, SREB Reading Interest Group Conference, November 12, 1971.

5. Opportunities for cooperative efforts involving neighboring colleges and regionally located colleges.
6. Need to sell reading programs to administrators to solicit their strong support.
7. Problems of staffing college reading programs.
8. College Teacher Education Programs, providing effective curriculum and experiences in reading.
9. Examination and evaluation of current reading materials and tests utilized in various black college reading programs in terms of meeting the needs of the students.
10. Research designs relative to all aspects of reading programs which are currently in effect at predominantly black colleges.

The group isolated items 3,9, and 10 above as three areas of major concern for which they requested support in study and implementation from SREB and IRA.

All of these needs have become issues that have importance and are areas in which we are involved at present seeking workable plans of attack to upgrade reading instruction in black colleges.

To canopy the issues listed here in the brief confines of the time allotted to me is an awesome task. I shall however very briefly discuss my point of view on the issues which require further expansion.

Improvement of Programs

This area of concern encompasses many things, but the underlying base for a successful program for the deprived or privileged would be the degree to which it implements the intangibles of behavior and learning.

Teachers of black students cannot be satisfied with the curricula as it exists. They should speak loud enough to be heard and assert their influence in overhauling the curricula to bring teaching more in consonance with the meaningful, abstract and empirical, cognitive, affective and psychomotor divides of learning for black students.

An honest assessment of many programs would reveal them to to be traditionally concerned, workbook and/or machine oriented, and programmed to deferred benefits. The liberating qualities for college reading programs for blacks would include the following essentials: A revelant and updated curriculum, remedial work in the language arts components, the I.Q. down-graded as a predictive criterion, and extensive counseling program, and emphasis upon success experiences.

Reading teachers have an advantage over content area teachers in that they have the expertise to get to the care of specific problems of black students. This opportunity could be used to best advantage in being more selectivc of resources and recommending their use to other members of the instructional staff.

Students pursuing the teacher education curriculum, for example, could benefit from paperbacks which relate to the areas of the General Professional Examinations of the TEEP in which black students are particularly weak.

The performance of Tennessee State students on the most recent test administration, for instance, showed that students answered fewer items in this area than in any of the remaining four areas of the test.

Specific weaknesses were noted in learning and instruction in items concerning basis of emotional behavior, learning curves, creative problem-solving abilities of children.

In Cultural Background-Social Sciences Literature and the Fine Arts, there was a paucity of information on themes and composers of various opereas, such as Taust, Romeo and Juliet; the Pop movement; and current trends in African government.

In reading classes the teaching what is directly relevant to the needs of the students would provide a purpose as motivation for more concentrated efforts for acquisition of skills.

Bibliography

A careful scruting of the effects of teaching materials employed in research designs for blacks and those in which blacks are used as a part of the test population would lend credence to selection of more appropriate materials to be used in college reading programs.

There should be more unity among the nation's black reading specialists in an exchange of ideas and in the preparation of a flexible bibliography that would serve as a ready resource list in our search for materials to use for black students.

In addition, another service that the college reading teacher can offer is the distribution of a bibliography of reading materials to other members of the college staff who could benefit from a knowledge of graded book lists to complement various reading needs across content disciplines.

Production of Materials

There is a paucity of commercially prepared reading materials for black college students. Materials and workbooks which line the shelves in reading labs are viewed by some as barely tolerable. They are unstimulating and detached from the main curriculum stream.

In light of this problem black college reading teachers usually prepare their own. Examination of materials prepared by black teachers reveal that many of the productions are organized through sound evaluation of the students' needs and clear thinking about objectives with reference to change in specific learning behaviors of black students. These materials are used mostly in local settings where trial of use includes consideration of some of the less easily systemalized variables such as student interest and enjoyment of use.

Provisions for testing with stringent controls are needed to examine the true worth of productions. Then concented effort should be exhibited by black reading teachers to seek publication of their work.

Administrative Support

College reading programs can end in fragments unless the reading teacher takes the initiative to relate students' strengths and weaknesses in reading to supplementary efforts of college-wide administrators and curriculum planners to relate learning to these difficulties.

The strong support of administrators should be solicited to provide a strong medium which will aid the college family in understanding the philosophical bases and organization of the program. Administrators can also serve as liaison persons in order to facilitate efforts of the reading teacher in involving all facets of the college.

To insure growth in the program the administrator must not only understand its philosophy, but must also work closely with the reading teacher in securing and manipulation funds for its maintenance and operation.

Campus development officers can be of tremendous assistance in informing the reading teachers of available grants and other resources to degray the cost of program operation.

Staffing Problems

In staffing college Reading programs the "Professional Preparation in Reading for classroom teachers" minimum standards as set forth by the Professional Standards and Ethics Committee of IRA should be considered in the processing of possible teachers. Often teachers with the master's degree in education with little or no preparation in reading are hired as reading teachers at the college level.

There is a tendency of black college reading specialists to "train their own," on the job. But this effort is sometime stifled by heavy work loads and large classes which impedes the instructional process.

There is also a need for administrators to be made aware of the deliminations of the duties of the reading specialist, many of which are performed without confines of the classroom, which we must perform for successful program operation.

Consideration should be given to reduction of teaching loads in order to free the specialist to carry out on the job training of program personnel.

Teacher Education

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education has reasserted the importance of continuous high quality teacher as an essential component of a national effort at school reform.

The board has called for federal focus on teacher education.[5]

This emphasis is causing reading education courses to take on new and important roles. Programs are becoming more systemic and product-oriented. There is more focus upon concept development, acquisition of skills and knowledges, which can be learned in specific instructional settings.

Students and teachers are collaborators in designing the instructional systems. Preparation of inservice teachers is viewed as a part of a continium which will affect the student throughout his career.

Even though the AACTE Committee is hesitant in predicting what the residual effects of performance based teacher education will be 10 to 20 years from now, they admit that certain effects of performance-based teacher education seem likely to improve and strengthen teacher education.[6]

Tests

Walter Pauk who has written extensively on study skills at the college level points our that "present reading tests are artificial in that they do not measure the real type of school work the student must do and the manner in which he habitually does it.[7]

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[5]Board Calls for Federal Focus on Teacher Education," AACTE Bulletin, Vol. XXIV, Number 9, December 1971, p. 5.

[6]Ibid., p. 6.

[7]Walter Pauk, "What Should Reading Tests for High School and College Freshmen Measure." the Journal of the Reading Specialist, Number 1, Volume 9, October, 1969, pp. 2-3.

There are other disadvantages of use of standardized tests. Because these tests are devised by individuals who come from culturally favored groups, the instruments may not be germane for blacks, particularly those who are disadvantaged. There is the tendency of teachers to "teach to the test when knowledgeable that the test is used for prepost evaluation." This places the evaluation in the position of dictating the program, not evaluating honest outcomes of instruction.

It does seem more practical to devise tests to measure the student's ability to handle the content of actual class work in a more realistic untimed setting.

Summary

The most important application of this talk is for black reading specialists to examine the current issues in public college reading programs. Efforts should be made to unite to allow cohesiveness in planning approaches to make the newly changed curricula one that will draw upon the individual and cultural strengths of blacks as blacks know them to be.

References

1. "Board calls for Federal Focus on Teacher Education," AACTE Bulletin, Vol. XXIV, Number 9, December 1971, p. 5.

2. Jenkins, Isabella T., recorder, unpublished minutes, SREB Reading Interest Group Conference, November 12, 1971.

3. Lomax, Louis, "Young Negroes Aren't Ready," the Saturday Evening Post, September 21, 1963, pp. 12-14.

4. Paul, Walter, "What Should Reading Tests for High School and College Freshman Measure," the Journal of the Reading Specialist, Number 1, Volume 2, October, 1969, pp. 2-3.

5. Pearl, Arthur, "The Failure of Upward Bound." the Chronicle of Higher Education, March 27, 1971. p. 8.